

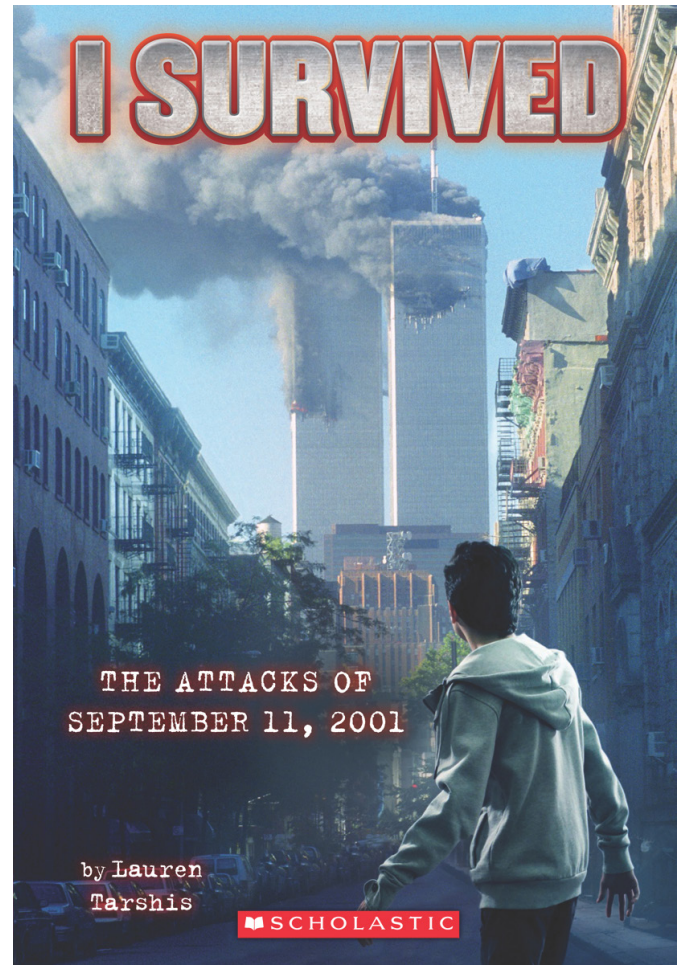
## Not Just For Kids: Lauren Tarshis’ ‘I Survived’ Series Tackles 9/11

Resilience is at the heart of ‘I Survived the Attacks of September 11, 2001,’ the author’s latest installment in her historical fiction series for young readers.

BY SUSAN CARPENTER, LOS ANGELES TIMES  
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There’s no easy way to talk with children about disasters. Parents and teachers can omit the disturbing details, but eventually the truth comes out. So how do we introduce kids to this kind of information? That’s the question Lauren Tarshis seeks to answer with “I Survived” — a historical fiction series for middle-grade readers. The sixth book, which has just been published, is “I Survived the Attacks of September 11, 2001” (Scholastic: 112 pp., \$4.99 paper).

Tarshis was reluctant to write about 9/11. A mother of four, she worked a mile from the World Trade Center at the time of the disaster and was actually traveling on an airplane that day. She’s been trying to put it all behind her ever since. But after receiving thousands of emails from readers suggesting she write



about “the planes in the trade center,” she decided to create a “siload [story] that would satisfy children’s curiosity but spare them the horrific and political aspects and religious overtones.”

Disturbing as the Sept. 11 attack are, the subject is ideal for Tarshis’ readers, who weren’t alive when they happened but whose entire lives have been shaped by the after-effects. Still, “I Survived the Attacks of September 11, 2001” is not a nonfiction blow-by-blow. It’s a fictionalized account told from the perspective of 11-year-old Lucas, whose father and uncle are New York City firefighters. Lucas lives in a suburb but has taken the train into the city on his own that morning, emerging from Penn Station and using the World Trade Center towers to navigate his way to his Uncle

Benny's fire station. Hearing the roar of the first plane's engine, he looks up and sees it "plunged like a knife into the side of one of the buildings."

There are no references to bodies falling out of buildings or details about the hijackers and their extensive planning, just Lucas' firsthand experience of seeing the crash and experiencing its chaotic aftermath with his family. While it's chilling to imagine a child witnessing 9/11, Tarshis embeds the story in a larger plot about Lucas' aspiration to play football and his parents' opposition, which accounts for about a third of the book.

When detailing Lucas' experience in New York City, Tarshis focuses on details that are vivid without being gruesome, placing much of the emphasis on the boy. Were the plane's instruments broken, he wonders? Maybe the pilot was confused or a movie was being filmed and something went horribly wrong? Lucas translates the 10 floors destroyed by the first plane into a metric he understands — football — and tries to imagine 10 football fields on fire and smoking at the same time.

Tarshis' decision to focus on Lucas was influenced by her years as the editor of *Storyworks*, a magazine for fourth- and fifth-grade students published by Scholastic, which also publishes the "I Survived" books. "Whenever I wrote about a disaster," she recalls, "whether it was a blizzard or an avalanche, I got an incredible response from kids, but I noticed something really interesting. They weren't so interested in the death and destruction. They were really interested in the boy. They were so eager to understand what it was like to be in an event like this."

Tarshis first conceptualized the "I Survived" series as narrative nonfiction, but finding relatable characters of the appropriate age proved challenging, so she decided to write historical fiction instead. She also planned to focus on obscure disasters, such as

the Hawaiian tsunami of 1954, but Scholastic and the series' readers have pointed her in a different direction.

Though some books have covered the well-traveled ground of the Titanic and Pearl Harbor, others have ventured into more recent events. In addition to 9/11, she has written about Hurricane Katrina. She is working on a story about Gettysburg and a boy escaping from slavery. After that, she may write about the 2011 Tohoku earthquake and tsunami in Japan — another subject "I've gotten a million requests for," Tarshis says.

"A big challenge of these books is trying to make some of these terrible episodes in history ... comprehensible to [young readers] and also to open doors for them so they can start to explore them on their own in a safe way," adds Tarshis, who ends the Sept. 11 book with a brief question and answer section as well as a real-life timeline tracing the events of that morning from 8:45 a.m. EDT, when American Airlines Flight 11 crashed into the World Trade Center's north tower, to 10:28 a.m., when the tower collapsed.

According to Tarshis, resilience is the theme that connects all the books in the "I Survived" series. "It's not so much the event for me," she explains. "It's the people. People have come through unbelievable ordeals and many of them move on and thrive. It's inspiring."